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ABSTRACT

The school board's role in improving teacher competency involves avoiding incompetent teachers, improving competent ones, and maintaining highly competent ones. Because teacher competence is a complex social phenomenon, affected by many different variables, boards should keep in mind that actions to improve competency may not be preferred by everyone involved. Board improvement of teacher competency should begin with policy-making and policy application in a number of specific areas. These areas include (1) teacher evaluation, where boards must avoid losing control over evaluation criteria through collective bargaining; (2) parent-teacher and teacher-administrator conflicts, where boards should avoid involvement in the resolution of specific cases; (3) teacher dismissal; (4) teacher training needs produced by special student needs; (5) moral support for staff members; and (6) staff development activities for teachers and administrators. Boards should train their administrators to assess teacher competency in all three areas of competency: subject matter, student learning activities, and teacher behavior to enhance learning activities. Administrators should not use competency testing of teachers, since it focuses only on subject matter. Boards can also help avoid teacher burnout by allowing sabbaticals, transfers, and staff rotation. (RW)

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What School Boards Can Do To Improve Teacher Competency

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What School Boards Can Do To Improve Teacher Competency

I should like, as a beginning, to give a very brief overview of the Iowa City Community School District, to describe from where I come. For those of you who might have gone awry of your geography, the state of Iowa is nestled between the state of Minnesota to the north and Missouri to the south. It is bounded on the west by the Missouri River and by the Mississippi on the east from which Iowa City is sixty miles. Iowa City was the original territorial capitol of the state, is the home of the University of Iowa and the birth place of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The district consists of about 8500 students enrolled in two high schools, three junior highs and fifteen elementary schools. The district covers the city of Iowa City, the suburban city of Coralville, the two small municipalities of North Liberty and Hills and surrounding rural areas-about 133 square miles. The principal commerce of the Iowa City area is education, light industry, and agriculture. We are a rather diverse but socioeconomically homogeneous community whose citizenry takes a vital and often vociferous interest in the education of their children.

As you may surmise, the patrons of the Iowa City Community School district have a very active interest in the quality of the educational program in the school district. I am sure that at this very moment, at this place, there is probably no where else in the world where more people are assembled who are more interested in the quality of educational programming for young men and women than at this convention.

When one mentions the word "educational program" many things come to mind, but probably nothing more critical than the word "teacher." Likewise, when one hears the word "educational quality" probably numerous ideas come to mind, but probably nothing more critical than the words "teacher competency."

Competency as a word can be very readily defined. It refers to fitness, to capability. It is synonymous with such words as "able" and "sufficient." The problem with competence is not, however, in defining the word, but in terms of identifying who is competent and who is not. It reminds me of the famous statement by the eastern merchantilist, John Wanamaker, who was speculating on the efficacy of the thousands of dollars his firm spent on advertising. His comment was "I know half the money I spend advertising is wasted but I can never find out which half." Such is the dilemma that I think we as school board members often face in terms of attempting to identify teachers who are competent and who are not and what to do about this. But the issue before us is not in terms of identifying who is competent and who is not, but rather looking at the broad area of teacher competency. Thus, it seems to me, our task with teacher competency is threefold. One, to avoid the incompetent and remediate the less competent teacher. Second, to improve the performance of competent teachers; and three, to maintain the performance of the highly competent teacher.

The way a board seeks to accomplish these activities is manifold. The things any board does, as well as the things I am going to discuss from here on, will not guarantee the improvement of teacher competency. Rather they will enhance the prospects that teacher competency will

improve. It is much the same as saying that certain opposite kinds of activities will not guarantee that teacher competency will decline. We know numerous actions and activities boards can take that will certainly enhance both prospects.

I think there are certain general considerations that first need to be stated about the professional competence of teachers. Basically we are referring to teacher behavior. And human behavior, as we all know, is a very complex phenomenon. We know that behavior is influenced by many variables and has multiple causes. We know that there are many influences upon the entire educational scene, school boards included. Teachers are influenced professionally, socially, politically, personally by social, political and economic factors. Education is well known for being faddish, seeking simple answers to complex questions, engaging in dichotomous thinking. Examples include either being totally child centered or subject matter oriented; espousing back to basics or innovactive education; ascribing to modern math, to the Sputnik scare. There are many activities that we as school board members likewise have engaged in a simplistic fashion when it comes to teacher competence. We must keep in mind that we are dealing with a very complex phenomenon that will not be improved in a simple fashion. It is particularly true that it will not be improved by a simple-minded solution.

A corrolary to the issue of complexity is that some of the things that will improve teacher competency may be preferred by some board members and not by others, by some teachers and not by others, by some administrators and not by others. Liking or not liking all of them is

not critical. Any one is probably not sufficient. Rather, it is a combination of activities, more or less, that is going to be critical in evaluating, maintaining and improving teacher competency.

It is worthy to comment on another issue of the importance to teacher competency. In most districts, approximately 80 percent of our budgets are for salaries. That is, salaries for all personnel. We are a human service enterprise. However, slightly over one-half of our total budget is for salaries for teachers. With this in mind we should be as concerned as John Wanamacher. For with this size of expenditure, and if we are ultimately concerned about the competency of our students, then we had best be concerned about the competency of our teachers.

It is axiomatic that the worst teacher in the world, given the ultimate in textbooks, curriculum, space and equipment will probably not be successful. Likewise, it is also true that an outstandingly competent teacher can be successful in the face of having poor or no textbooks, an inadequate curriculum, dingy space, and defective equipment. However, people burn out easily under these conditions, they have poor morale, their performance deteriorates, they cannot sustain good effort. Consequently, we, as board members, have a major responsibility toward the issue of improving teacher competence.

A boards involvement in the improvement and enhancement of teacher competency begins with its policy making functions. Policies and board actions that deal with teacher recruitment, retention, staff development, evaluation, and dismissal are all critical areas. The administrative and curricular staff that implement and guide these policies is of critical importance. Generally speaking, we are referring to the boards

guaranteeing that the superintendent is responsive and sensitive to this issue. The people responsible for personnel management are ordinarily a key, but also the curriculum, business, administration, and service staff must likewise be responsive to these areas. This is particularly true as these functions relate to staff development activities. Policies as well as administrative regulations need to be simplified yet thorough, uniformly applied and updated systematically--and reviewed annually.

There is also need for a board to lobby for state law which spells out a board's expectations for the evaluation of teachers. Basically, such a law should retain for the board the absolute authority to determine the criteria that are to be used in the evaluation. In the absence of a state law, a board needs to develop a policy that establishes this authority. A policy, however, is needed in either event. It should specify the criteria by which the evaluation will occur and through which the school administration can organize the details and behaviors that will be evaluated with respect to these criteria.

Since most states are now involved in negotiated agreements with teachers, it is important that these criteria for teacher evaluation not be negotiated away. The evaluation process, however, is an appropriate subject of negotiation, but the criteria by which the evaluation will be made is the prerogative of the board and, administratively, by the educational administrators.

Related to the negotiation process, and to teacher competency, is the importace of having an educator either as the chief negotiator or closely involved in contract negotiations. Much can be lost in the negotiation process if the chief negotiator is not sensitive to many of

the unique issues dealing with teacher evaluation and teacher competency.

A specific in terms of board behavior that affects board members as individuals is the caution to not become inappropriately involved between administrators and teachers or between parents and teachers. Attempts to seek resolution of conflicts should be done in a professional manner and by the professional educators. Board members should refer all complaints of any patron through an established chain of command. For boards to deal with specific parental complaints only tends to decrease teacher morale and consequently affect teacher competence.

In dealing with teacher conflicts with administrators a similar approach is also necessary. While teachers may feel that they are not being supported by the board, if the board has insured that they have a fair and just administrative appeal, then the teachers will feel more responsive to the direction and appeal afforded them by the administrative officers.

Similarly, in dismissal. The board needs to be supportive of the school administration if a reasonable case is presented. Often cases are lost on "technicalities" and boards must realize that they themselves are not experts in the judical process or the arbitration procedure. Questions must be asked by the board of itself: is the board really qualified to judge; should the board be involved in a hearing? These are basic issues which should be resolved by the board: whether or not they should be involved in the appeal process; whether it should be part of the negotiated agreement. There are teachers who will require dismissal and the board must be consistent in the application of its dismissal policy.

A different issue has arisen in the last decade that influences teacher competency: the special needs of students that have been mainstreamed into our programs. Often times teachers feel inadequate in dealing with the multitude of problems that children present. They did not receive specialized training required to deal with these problems in the course of their regular education. Problems such as learning disabilities, the need for resource help, a variety of special education problems dealing with emotional disturbances, sensory and physical deficits, gifted and talented, English as a second language as well as unique needs that are idiosyncratic to a particular district need to be reviewed and appreciated by board members in terms of providing the teachers with appropriate resources, training, assistance and support in dealing with these special problems. The board needs to be cognizant of the special needs of the district as well as idiosyncratic needs of individual schools.

The issue of moral support has sort of been an underlying theme in a number of issues I have discussed. Board members, by visiting schools, visiting programs, encouraging monthly presentations of curricular areas at board meetings, paying attention to the physical plant in terms of its functionalness, its attractiveness, do much to enhance teacher morale and support.

In terms of staff development, the Iowa City School District provides a Thursday afternoon early release, an hour earlier than the conclusion of the normal school day. This is for the purpose of in-service training programs that are coordinated at the district level as well as at the building level. The chance of competency occurring

without in-service training is indeed remote and a financial and time commitment to this is very crtical.

We have also expended considerable time and funds on training administrators in recognizing teacher competencies based on criteria by Madeline Hunter's (1) research at UCLA. We have attempted to develop a consistent and reliable teacher evaluation procedure and utilize the Madeline Hunter program as a model. It is an ongoing activity. I believe that more important than the model is the presence of three categories of teacher competency that the model addresses itself to. First, is subject matter area or content area. Second, are the activities that the teacher has students accomplish. Third, are the teacher's behaviors: what the teacher does to enhance these activities. I believe these three areas of teacher competency are important areas to keep in mind as board members deal with issues of teacher competency. All too often we hear that "So and So" is an outstanding mathematician. This may be, but this does not mean that this individual is a good math teacher. We also know of persons who interact quite effectively with children, involve them in exciting activities and are very responsive to them. However, they may not be good teachers either. They may fail either in terms of appropriate knowledge in the content area or in terms of what behaviors the teacher illicits to enhance the classroom activities. Frequently, when parents call board members to complain about a particular teacher, it is with reference to only one of these three areas. The reliability of the parents' assessment needs to be evaluated first, by an administrator and secondly, in the context of the three areas of teacher competency. Similarly when someone comes

recommended to a board member it may be in relation to only one of these three areas and the board member needs to be sensitive that, again, the administrator should do the hiring in the context of all three areas of teacher competency.

I am anti-competency testing which is a subject that has enjoyed some popularity particularly in the state of Iowa. We have currently before our legislature, for the second consecutive year, a bill to require competency testing in teachers. I believe that competency testing is an over-simplified solution to a very complex problem. A vast effort will be devoted to the implementation of competency testing but it does not appear that it will be that productive in the end. We are dealing with a very heterogeneous profession and the cost of implementation will be overwhelming. Very few teachers fail because they are deficient in subject matter--the thrust of most teacher competency legislation. As I indicated just previously, there are basically three categories of teacher competency and most competency testing programs only talk of assessing competency in one area, the subject matter area. According to most educational administrators, few incompetent teachers are deficient in this area.

Finally, I will address myself to the problem of "burn-out." I believe that board members can be supportive of the administrative staff in several areas in this regard. First, is to develop a sabbatical system whereby teachers who are on the verge of burn-out can be assigned new duties. They can also be provided transfers to new schools, changes in grade levels, either temporary or permanent. Also, a system of staff

development of administrators that involves the rotation of principals in the school district can serve to increase teacher competency by providing a systematic opportunity to grow as well as provide administrative staff similar opportunities, and enhance the academic and professional vitality of the staff of the schools involved.

The issue of teacher competency is indeed a complex one as are so many issues in education. The enhancement of teacher competency is not an issue which lends itself to simple, easy solutions. Like so many issues in education, many factors can enhance teacher competency. I believe, however, that the following observations--by a German sociologist and a British educator (2) -- capture the essence of this complex issue and serve as an appropriate conclusion:

> "The teacher is an institutional leader in the first place. Prestige attaches to the office and not, at any rate initially, to the person. He is supposed to be the acknowledged superior in the pupil-teacher relationship and authority rests not so much in him as a person as in the laws and traditions of his office. Obviously with a successful teacher the element of personal leadership will grow greater and greater as time passes but this kind of acceptance he has to seek after and to deserve, for it entails a presentation of a personality enlarged beyond the classroom and not wholly to be contained within it. For instance, the martinet (the tin soldier) makes himself a classroom and school figure who does not properly relate to the pupils' world outside."

References

1. Hunter, Madeline. Prescription for Improved Instruction. El Segundo, Calif. TIP Publications, 1976.

2. Mannheim, Karl and Stewart, W. A. C. An Introduction to the Sociology of Education. New York: Humanities Press, 1962.